

San Patricio County, Texas

**Written Testimony by Desiree L. Voth
Before the House Committee on County Affairs
June 6, 2018**

I serve as the Governmental Affairs/Public Information Officer and legal counsel for the Commissioners Court for San Patricio County. Thank you for the opportunity to present information on emergency response activities, the impact natural disasters have on county finances, and generally evaluate whether counties have the necessary ordinance-making and enforcement authority to deal with flood risk in unincorporated rural and suburban areas of Texas.

The retirement of the name “Harvey” as a storm was merited and I will forever recall when I first heard of Harvey’s presence. This rapidly intensifying storm inflicted severe windstorm damage to the Coastal Bend area and then unleashed record rainfall and flooding on our upper coast. Although I believe our emergency management personnel was ready, Harvey presented the utmost challenge. Fortunately, due to emergency management training such as the Coastal Bend Hurricane Conference and our Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), emergency preparedness has greatly improved in recent years. This increased training and emergency response review undoubtedly saved many lives during this unmatched storm event. Counties such as San Patricio rely on volunteers and local industry to help fund emergency preparedness training due to our trim budgets.

San Patricio County immediately transitioned to addressing the removal of debris caused by Harvey after securing the safety of our residents. Our focus was to restore utilities, provide access for emergency vehicles, and reestablish public services as well as private businesses. It is well documented the enormous amount of debris left in Harvey’s wake. Harvey demolished buildings, trees, vehicles, and personal items. All of which must be collected and disposed of properly. Although our county’s equipment and personnel were utilized, additional resources were required. San Patricio County spent \$4.5 million for debris removal following this storm. Very little has been reimbursed. Fortunately, our county had the foresight and the reserves to answer the debris removal call – I do not know if all counties hit by Harvey can say the same. This week we are currently conducting our annual budget workshops. The message has been “keep your budget flat”.

We recognize that recovering from Harvey will take 3 to 5 years. Fortunately, a private foundation has offered to fund two positions that will help San Patricio County during this recovery process. Credit is certainly due to the partnership of local, state and federal agencies and private volunteer organizations for their recovery efforts. Conditions are improving and lives and businesses are rebuilding. More recovery resources however are needed as there are some locations where necessary resources have been sadly inadequate, and the lack of state and federal help has seriously impacted and delayed the recovery effort. We need to consider and implement significant improvements in our recovery plans and procedures before next the Harvey hits. Immediate access to resources after the storm is essential.

Simply stated, Texas counties lack authority to prevent flooding events such as Harvey. Unlike cities, counties do not have general ordinance-making authority. Instead county powers must be specifically delegated by the state constitution or the state legislature. Through plat regulations, counties may require that subdivision developers manage the drainage within the subdivision and coordinate subdivision drainage with the general storm drainage pattern for the area. However, San Patricio County lacks the authority to adopt and enforce a comprehensive drainage plan for the unincorporated areas of our county. With high growth occurring in the unincorporated areas, counties should be delegated the authority to adopt and enforce a comprehensive flood drainage plan.

In summary, there has been significant improvements in emergency preparedness in recent years, but more must be done to give counties the additional authority to prevent flooding. First responders and volunteers responded fearlessly during Hurricane Harvey. However, we must improve our recovery efforts. We appreciate the interest and support of the House Committee on County Affairs on this important topic.